Telephone interview with CAPT Kiem Do, former Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, South Vietnamese Navy. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 6 January 2008.

I thought we'd talk about your recollections of your escape from South Vietnam over 30 years ago. I have read your book, *Counterpart* several times and it has a lot of good information. But there are some additional questions I have, perhaps you can answer.

When I wrote that book, the Naval Institute requested that I cut it and lower the number of pages. I think quite a few chapters were not very clear to Western readers.

I think the book is fairly clear and quite detailed concerning your early life and your time at the French Maritime Academy, etc. What I want to concentrate on concerns the very last days in April of 1975. About the 26th or 27th of April you were then stationed at Navy Headquarters in Saigon. And you were Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. Did you work directly for Admiral [Chung Tan] Cang?

Yes. When he took over the Navy.

You already had developed a relationship with Richard Armitage prior to this time, hadn't you?

Yes. Back in 1969, '70, '71, when I was the commander of the Fourth Coastal Zone, Armitage came down there as an intelligence officer to gather intelligence in the area. He liked to join in my unit, particularly the coastal groups 44, 45, 46. That was where you could collect a lot of information about the communists. The coastal group was designed to mingle with the people in the area from whom they could get a lot of good information about the movement of the communists, particularly in the transportation of weapons and ammunition.

So you and Mr. Armitage had a very good working relationship.

Yes. I liked the guy very much. He was very open for an intelligence officer. And also he was kind of a daredevil. He didn't mind following me all around the unit when we were deep into the communist area.

When you were at Naval Headquarters on or about the 26th and 27th of April, Armitage had been up at Bien Hoa and escaped from there at the last minute. He arrived at Headquarters there in Saigon in a helicopter, didn't he? And he looked like he had been through something.

Right. He was dressed in some sort of field outfit.

He was a bit dirty, shall we say.

He was dirty and there were some holes in his clothes.

And all he had was a shoulder holster and a .45 pistol.

Yes. Like a pilot.

You then met with him.

Yes. His helicopter landed at the Naval headquarters right near the flagpole. I met him there and he said, "Come with us! Come on! It is too late now!" And I told him that no, I still

have my people and I just can't leave now. He said, "It's all over." And I said, "I know that but . . .

Did the two of you then sit down and come up with the famous plan for evacuating the fleet?

We sat down and made the plan before that--before the 26th. He came to my office on the 24th and told me that the situation was desperate and that the United States did not want to leave the fleet in the hands of the communists if they took over the country. So I agreed with him but I didn't dare to make any suggestions because politically it was too risky for an officer to talk about running away with the fleet without the authorization of the higher ups. So we did make a plan and I told him that this plan was very, very dangerous. I just cannot do it on paper.

So the plan was verbal, then.

Yes. Verbal. There was nothing written down.

Did you get the impression that he had been authorized by Washington?

He did tell me that. He told me that he represented the Secretary of Defense.

And so the plan to evacuate the fleet came from the Secretary of Defense?

Yes.

The plan the two of you came up with was strictly verbal and without the knowledge of your superiors.

No. I did report it to Admiral Cang.

And what was his reaction?

Cang had just come back from the Army. He had only been with the Navy maybe for two weeks. After 13 years away from the Navy, he really had lost track of all the ships and everything related to the Navy. Concerning the Navy itself, he had no knowledge. And also he was pretty much aware that the situation was desperate. So he said, "Okay. Go ahead and do it but it could cost you your head and mine too if the plan was made public. We could be in deep trouble."

The plan was for you to get crews on these ships and try to go down the river and to rendezvous at Con Son Island.

Correct.

Whose idea was it to rendezvous at Con Son?

It was my idea. Con Son is an island with a very well protected bay. I particularly looked into Con Son because it was close to the Mekong Delta, where the Mekong River runs out to the sea. That would allow our smaller boats--the brown water boat--to get out and join the fleet. Actually, Con Son was the only place to make a rendezvous. Most of our small brown water boats didn't have navigation equipment so Con Son was easy to locate and get to.

So it would have been a very easy job even without navigation gear to get to Con Son.

Correct.

And because it was further south, the chances were that it would not be attacked right away.

The bay was very well protected. If the communists attacked by airplane, it would have been difficult for them because we had plenty of firepower to protect the area.

I was reading in your book that it wasn't a very easy thing to leave because there were some people who decided at the last minute that they didn't want to go.

Correct. Some people didn't have all the information. Some people who thought they had too much to lose didn't want to go. Some were related to the temporary government who asked them to stay.

So some held out some hope that there could be negotiations with the communists.

There was nothing to negotiate at that time.

The communists had all the cards.

That's right.

As I understand it, the original plan was to get what they call skeleton crews aboard these vessels. But you recognized the possibility that they would not leave unless they could take their families with them.

That was obvious. Otherwise we could have expected a lot of mutiny on those ships if they couldn't get their families out. As a matter of fact, there was one small ship, the PGM-613, I think. The captain wanted to go but the crew didn't want to go. So they killed him and went over to the communists. I have no clear idea what really happened.

You yourself were able to get on one of these ships and leave. What do you remember about going down the river? And you had lost track of your family at that time.

My plan for my family was to keep them at our house to the last moment. And then I would send someone to my house with a radio. Then they would leave and go aboard a fishing boat nearby. The fishing boat would then follow the fleet. This would allow my family to survive if the communists attacked the fleet.

But the situation had become so bad and there was so much shooting all around that they went to the fishing boat without the radio and without the man I had assigned to get in touch with the fleet. So they tried to get out to sea by themselves in order to get to us. And I couldn't locate them without the radio. And I lost my family that way.

But you did eventually find them on Wake Island much later.

That's correct.

What ship or boat were you on when you went down the Saigon River?

HQ-11. For the sake of writing the story, I mentioned something about the fact that I had been commanding officer of the HQ-07, the same type of ship.

What kind of ship was it?

It was an MSF, a mine sweeper. But originally I had been commanding officer of a PCE. But that day I was aboard the MSF--HQ-11.

So when you got out to sea, you were aboard the HQ-11.
Correct.

How long did it take to get to Con Son?
About 9 hours.

And there were many other ships accompanying you.
There were 32 ships but we had to sink two and leave behind a bunch of smaller boats.

I understand there were many refugees on these ships.
Right. They were all over. It was too crowded to move around.

When you got to Con Son, did all the ships drop anchor?
Yes.

Did anyone go ashore or did they stay on the ships?
They didn't go ashore. For what? Some people who were ashore came out to our ships.

I understand there were many refugees already on Con Son Island who had been evacuated from some of the northern cities--Danang, Nha Trang . . .
No. No. Those people were not dropped at Con Son Island. They went to Phu Quoc Island. That was a big island where my headquarters had been. It was near the Cambodian and Thailand territorial waters.

But there were some people on Con Son Island who came out to you.
No more than a dozen.

These ships had limited food, water, and medicine.
We didn't have anything. Our main concern was getting the ships out into international waters so the American ships could pick us up. That's why I told my wife and children not to bring anything. All they would need were two changes of clothes.

That's what you thought at the time.
Yes. That's what I thought at the time.

What date did you arrive at Con Son Island?
The 30th of April.

You knew the plan you and Armitage had come up with went only as far as getting you to Con Son.
That's all.

The rest of the plan had not been developed yet.

No. Because we thought that the American ships would pick us up.

When you arrived at Con Son, was anyone in contact with the U.S. fleet at that time.
I tried to get hold of Armitage but couldn't. Afterward, yes. But not at Con Son.

Armitage told me that after he left you, he got on that helicopter and flew out to the *Blue Ridge*, which was the flagship for the fleet. And you know the story where he had to convince the admiral who he was because he had no identification on him at the time. At that point they sent a radio message back to the Pentagon in Washington. It sounds like Mr. Armitage came up with the rest of the plan at that time. And that was to send a ship down to Con Son Island and to pick you all up and escort you out into international waters. When I asked him if he got that part of the plan from Washington, he said no. "I made it up at that point by myself."
[Laughter]

That sounds like him, doesn't it?
It certainly does. But I bluff him too. Actually, I did not bluff. But I did not tell him that besides myself and the crew, I have a lot of refugees on board.

So when he was telling Admiral Whitmire that he needed to send a ship to Con Son Island because the South Vietnamese Navy was there, he was under the impression that those ships were manned only by skeleton crews and were not crowded with almost 30,000 refugees.
Yes. He bluffed his government. Actually, though, he didn't know that we had so many people.

But it sounds like he really did make up that part of the plan.
Yes.

It was the morning of May 1st when you saw a ship coming into the area of Con Son Island?
No. I did not see the ship. After the ships were gathered at Con Son, my main concern was to look for my family. I went aboard all the ships to ask for my family. At that time Mr. Armitage got hold of Admiral Cang and Commodore Hoang Co Minh* on the HQ-03. In the meantime, I was going from ship to ship to look for my family.

So once you got to Con Son, your responsibilities as a commanding officer were over because you were outranked by Admiral Cang and everyone else.
My job was done. Actually, it was not really my job to get the ship out to Con Son. When I got to Con Son, the American navy had not yet arrived. We were waiting for them to escort us out.

When did you realize that Armitage and the U.S. Navy were coming to the rescue?
I asked Hoang Co Minh to stay back for one more day so I can, first of all, look for my family. And secondly, many small boats were trying to come down from the Mekong Delta and get out to sea. Many of them tried to come out and join us at Con Son. But because they were

so small, it took a long time for them to get there. So I asked them to stay just one more day. And then Commodore Minh, who was my friend, told me, "No. No. No. We go."

So I got hold of Armitage and I asked him if I could go aboard one of the American ships that would stay in the area of Con Son, so I could guide all those small boats from the river out. And, at the same time, I could somehow find my family. But after a few hours, the answer from Armitage was no.

Did you talk to him directly?

No, not directly. But I asked Admiral Cang to forward my request. At that time I decided to take a PCF to go back to the Saigon area to try to look for my family and join the ships later.

And you did that.

Yes. But the boat broke down and finally I was picked up by one of the South Vietnamese ships that I had sent to pick up some other people down south.

A lot of people got out of Saigon on the 30th. Among them were people who hoped to form a new government. There were two generals, a colonel, and some other officers. They ran out of fuel and got stranded at the river mouth and couldn't get out to sea. I heard them and sent one of the Vietnamese ships that was down south to make a swing up the river mouth and pick up those people. That ship couldn't join us at Con Son before the fleet left and was left lagging behind. My boat was broken at sea. I couldn't do anything. It was that ship that picked me up.

Where did it go after they picked you up?

We were able to catch up and join the fleet.

So you stayed on that ship until you reached Subic?

Yes.

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*Hoang Co Minh died in August 1987 while leading an armed incursion into Vietnam.

What was the name of the ship?

I remember the captain because he was one of my students at the Naval Academy. His name was Quin Ngo Quyen. The name of the ship was HQ-17, one of the Coast Guard cutters.

What they called the WHECs.

That's right.

So at this point HQ-17 joined the rest of the fleet already steaming toward Subic Bay.

Correct.

How big was this WHEC?

About 310 feet or so.

I understand that the conditions on these ships was terrible.

Terrible in the sense of morale because everyone had lost their country and everything they had. And we didn't have enough food for them. We had very little rice and that was it. We didn't have water for them, either. The water we had was just for drinking.

How many people were on your ship?

Two thousand people. They were all over the ship.

So you caught up with the rest of the fleet.

The American ships were then supposed to send some food and water to us. But no, we didn't receive a lot of food and water. The food that did come to us was onions, some watermelon, and some potatoes, but no rice. And rice was what we needed. And they don't have a lot of rice on American ships. To feed 2,000 people, you need rice, not watermelon. So we had to make do with what little rice we had left. We were forced to dilute the rice into a kind of soup.

Did you see the *Kirk* at this time.

I saw the *Kirk*.

Were you now able to contact Armitage?

Yes, even though I didn't know he was on board the *Kirk*. I sent him a lot of messages asking him to help me find my family. I also sent him a message I sent to Admiral [Elmo] Zumwalt asking for help to locate my family.

The whole time the fleet was in transit to Subic Bay, the seas were very calm.

Very calm. Sea state zero.

But it was also very, very hot.

Oh yes. It was very hot but so very calm. People could live on the open deck without any danger.

How many days did it take to cross the South China Sea to Subic Bay?

A normal trip would take about 2 days. We started on May 1st and we arrived on the 6th. It took so long because we had to wait for all the ships that had only one engine.

Didn't you have problems with engines failing?

A lot of them. Generators also broke down. And there was no radar.

So you had to stay within sight of each other.

Yes. We stayed very close to each other. I knew that we couldn't lose anyone because at night I could see the lights of the American ships all around us.

Did you see more than one American ship?

Oh yes. Many.

Did the corpsman from the *Kirk*, Chief Burwinkel, ever come aboard your ship?

I don't know. But there was one officer, a lieutenant who came aboard either the fifth or sixth day. He talked about lowering our flag and all the conditions we'd have to follow before we could get into Philippine territorial waters.

Were you aware of this diplomatic problem before this, that the Marcos government would refuse to allow you into Subic?

We didn't know about any of this.

But you did know that this American lieutenant had come aboard your ship and told the commanding officer that in order for the ship to be able enter Subic Bay, that the Vietnamese flag would have to come down and be replaced by the American flag. And that they would have to paint over the Vietnamese hull numbers.

Yes. And also disable the guns--the 3-inch guns and the 20mm or 40mm, whatever, and get rid of the ammunition. I realized that it was too much for our crew to do that. They wouldn't do that. And also it would be very, very upsetting for the 2,000 people aboard. So I sent a message with the lieutenant suggesting that we do something else, that we return the ship to the American Navy. After that you can do whatever you want with the ship. We wouldn't care.

Now I knew that Armitage would get the approval to make a transfer of those ships to the American Navy. And then I sent the message out to other ships that we have to organize a ceremony of flag-lowering and flag-hoisting. That was a very sad ceremony on board all the ships around.

What became of the Vietnamese flag from your ship?

I have one right here. There was another one that the captain got. And also some other officers. We had many flags on the ship at the time. Each one of us would save one.

You never saw Armitage during the entire voyage.

Never. Not until I got to Guam.

What ship was Admiral Cang on?

He was on HQ-3.

I looked at *Kirk*'s log and noted that Armitage went aboard HQ-3 several times to meet with him and that the two would then return to the *Kirk* to meet with Captain Jacobs and Captain Roane. But you had no knowledge of those meetings.

No. We were at the rear of the convoy. We communicated only by radio.

Do you know what became of those ships after you got to Subic?

They were given to the Philippine Navy. One or two, I think, were given to Taiwan or the Japanese.

You all were very lucky that the sea remained very calm for the entire voyage. Had it been rough or stormy, it would have been a disaster.

Very, very much so. Usually at that time of year, even when we would go to Subic Bay for repairs or for training, it would take a lot of preparation and it would take us at least 2 days to get there. And many times, we met rough seas. But this time someone up there really took care

of us. There were so many things we would term a coincidence or luck, but the more I think about it, there were no coincidences, no luck. It was all planned by a higher being.

What ever became of Admiral Cang?

He went to Washington, DC for a short while, then moved to Bakersfield, CA. He worked for an oil company there. He's now dead.

What ever happened to Commodore Hung?

He lives in Washington, DC.

I went to the Kirk reunion where I met you two Octobers ago. I recall one thing, that you were reunited with your brother. And you hadn't seen him for many, many years.

Fifty-four years.

During the whole time of the war, he was there and you were in the south. Did you have any contact with him at all during that time?

Not at all.

Did you have any contact with him after you came to America?

Not right after. It wasn't until 1986.

Were you able to write to him?

I was able to receive news from him because he had gotten in touch with people in France. But I didn't dare to write anything to my family until relations improved between the U.S. and Vietnam. Then I learned that he was a professor at the Hanoi University.

When you got to see him two years ago, did you know he was coming?

Yes. As a member of our family, he wouldn't be able to go the United States, no matter what. But his wife died and he married another woman. She was divorced from a high ranking communist cadre. That man had a daughter in California who had married an American. At her wedding, she wanted her parents to be in California with her. The communist cadre couldn't go but he asked his ex-wife to go. His ex-wife said she wouldn't go anywhere without her new husband. So my brother, the new husband, got some kind of official paper so he could go. He said that he didn't even know what kind of paper he had.

When he got to California, he sent me an email that he was coming. At that time, his daughter was living in Washington, DC, so he was coming to see his daughter. At the same time we were having the reunion, so he came.

You say he was coming to Washington to see his daughter?

Right.

Was this his step-daughter?

No, his own daughter.

How did his daughter get here?

That is another story. His daughter is very, very bright. She went to Russia for study. After she came back to Vietnam she went to Germany for a few more years to study. When she was in Germany, somehow she got together with a Vietnamese man who was there and they both came to the United States as temporary workers. When she arrived in the U.S., I told her to study hard. She did and got her MBA. She then applied to a firm and turned her study permit into a working permit. During that time she met a Vietnamese man in Washington, DC, and they got married. I replaced her father--my brother--at the wedding.

So that's how his daughter got here. So he was coming to visit her and got to see you at the same time at the *Kirk* reunion.

That's right.

You saw your brother for the first time in 54 years.

For the first time since 1954.

CAPT Do. I appreciate all the time you spent with me this morning. Thank you very much.